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ABSTRACT

The personal essay does not rely on the straight, even rows of a carefully laid out vegetable garden, on strings pulled tight to connect beginnings to ends. Instead it meanders, pulls from here and there, thinks out loud, asks questions, and proceeds leisurely through disconnections to make connections, as an ever-changing flower garden in which flowers grow where they were not planted, escaping their borders, refusing to be orderly. The personal essay course might be an alternative to freshmen-level courses which instruct students in the practice of constructing clear rational arguments--a place to think about alternatives to traditional academic discourse and even to consider "women's ways of knowing." There is no place to acknowledge personal context in the modern academic essay, which demands that one put aside feelings, intuitions, and experiences and instead somehow stand outside one's self and reason objectively and impersonally. Rather than trying to discover what makes a written voice distinctly a "woman's" or a "man's," writers and educators might instead look at the personal essay as a composition--of self and literary form--which will allow multiple voices to be heard. By its very nature and genus, the personal essay is open to diverse structures; it invites conversation, and allows the writer to think, observe, and reflect at leisure. (RS)

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Preface:
This is a very speculative work, influenced by the current work on privileging the personal essay in the academy, by Jane Tompkins' recent writing, and by the idea that the personal essay (described by Shirley Brice Heath as bits of conversation, a multiplicity of voices, a "mind-walk"), because of its non-linear form, parallels women's connected ways of knowing. I wanted also to explore how/if a woman can construct her authority to speak in the academy by using the personal essay. Finally I wanted to see if the personal essay can be adapted to writing about issues in the academy and continue to be a personal essay.
I invite you to enter into this conversation.

A Personal Essay

by Terry Myers Zawacki

I learned to garden from my mother. Every year it was the same--Mom watched while Dad prepared the plot for vegetables. Dad wanted perfectly straight, even rows; he hammered in small stakes to mark the beginning and end of the row. Next he stretched a string between the stakes until it was taut. Then, guided by the string, he hoed the row. He measured off a foot or two between rows and then repeated the process of staking and stretching string.

Mom waited until Dad had done all of his planting before she sowed flower seeds in the spaces he had left her on the borders of the garden and the edges of the yard. She loved flowers which could be relied on year after year and didn't mind where they were planted--red-orange poppies with black centers, tall sunflowers sharing the narrow space between our driveway and the neighbor's garage with daylillies at their shoulders and violets at their feet, feathery purple asters, scarlet irises, and rainbows of marigolds and zinnias. I remember her delight

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whenever she discovered that flowers she had planted in one space had somehow made their way to other spots about the yard or planted roots in neighbors' yards.

Today I will write, I have promised myself. It's early morning and I have brewed a large pot of coffee. I pour my first cup and then reward myself for getting started at this hour with a leisurely walk along the wildflower beds which meander around the perimeter of my wooded acre of property. The "money" plants with their purply-pink clusters of flowers dominate the beds this time of year. I worry that they are taking over, especially when I don't see any sign of the Oriental poppies which have always sprung up alongside them. I do notice with pleasure that the purple thistle I dug up from a friend's farm in Culpepper last summer has reseeded itself and lies in great healthy clumps throughout the upper beds. I am never sure what will appear from season to season--so far this month the hollyhocks, which I thought had died of rust last summer, are bushy with foliage but only one foxglove has come up in a place where there had been many. I like my gardens to surprise me, for flowers to grow where they were not planted, escaping their borders, refusing to be orderly. Marigolds sprout even on the edges of my woods. Black-eyed Susans wander here and there. Seeds blow; roots travel underground. The connections cannot be seen, yet I can tell you, when I stop to think about it, how each connects to each.

It's that same quality, I think, that attracts me to the personal essay. The personal essay does not rely on straight

even rows, on strings pulled tight to connect beginnings to ends. Instead it meanders, pulls from here and there, thinks out loud, asks questions, and proceeds leisurely through disconnections to make connections. Its origins can be traced to the conversational forms of letters and journals, which assumed a friendly dialogue with readers whose voices could be heard in the writing.

Montaigne is generally credited with establishing the essay as a literary form which allowed for personal observations and inquiries about topics of interest shared by readers. Emerson used the essay to communicate personally and invite readers to enter a dialogue about serious intellectual topics. He abandoned traditional rhetorical structures and relied instead on loosely connected anecdotes, quotations, examples, and illustrations as a way to create openings for readers to join the conversation. Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, the essay had been redefined by educators to be used in the schools as a form for displaying knowledge. There was no conversation in the "school" essay and certainly no room for personal observations and reflections; instead students were taught to argue a position and to use the written words of authorities to support their points (Heath).

"One primary goal in this course is that students will be able to construct clear rational arguments," my colleague said as she described a new course being designed to fill a lower-level general education requirement. After the meeting, I asked her why we have to focus solely on teaching students to write arguments.

I suggested that a new course, especially a freshman-level course, might be the very place to think about alternatives to traditional academic discourse and even to consider ways to recognize what Mary Belenky and her co-authors call "women's ways of knowing." My colleague reacted with surprise, puzzlement, and annoyance. "What alternatives are there?" she demanded. I was annoyed at her annoyance, but I must admit that I wasn't sure either about the alternatives.

I think the personal essay might be an alternative. In Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule observe that the most successful "knowers," are those who have learned not to extricate the self as they acquire knowledge but to integrate the self with what they have learned from others (134). Many of the women Belenky and her co-authors interviewed spoke of their efforts to "reclaim the self" as they wrote by "weaving together strands of rational and emotive thought" and knowledge they "intuitively" felt was important with what they learned from others (134). One woman explained it as "'You let the inside out and the outside in'" (135).

Instead of writing I have spent the afternoon digging compost into small area of the garden I've reserved for tomatoes. The compost comes from the pile which lies about three feet into the woods behind one of the shady perennial beds. The pile starts with leaves and grass clippings, and to that I add peelings, cores and seeds, coffee grounds, wood ash, even shredded newspapers. Last year plants I couldn't identify but which looked like tomatoes grew up in a patch of sun on the edge

of the compost pile. Small yellow-spotted beetles ate all but one, which grew until its large ungainly stalk flopped over onto the hostas in the flower bed. Finally I decided to pull it out. Tiny potatoes scattered around me; the potato peelings had rooted in the compost.

"Often nothing tangible remains of a woman's day," Virginia Woolf writes in "Women and Fiction." The food she prepares has been eaten and the children are reared and have gone out into the world. I think about Woolf's essay and her question "Where does the accent fall?" as she wonders what subject matter a woman novelist can seize upon. In the past, Woolf says, the virtue of women's writing was its spontaneity, "like that of the blackbird's song or the thrush's." As women move more into the world of men, Woolf believes, they will no longer be content to "record with astonishing acuteness the minute details which fall under their own observation." Women will learn to look beyond personal relationships and at the wider questions of "destiny and the meaning of life" (82-83). When I read Woolf, I wonder, Why can't "the accent" can fall on the minute details of a woman's life; in telling the minute details and observing how these details connect don't we get at the wider meanings.

Joan Didion says in "Why I Write" that the specific, the tangible, what was usually considered the peripheral, by everyone she knew as a student (and continues to know), is what drew her attention. When she tried to "contemplate the Hegelian dialect," she found herself thinking instead about the flowering pear tree outside her window. By concentrating on what she would see and

taste and touch, on "the butter" and "the Greyhound bus," she came to see that she could discover what she was thinking by writing about the pictures in her mind because once she had written them she began to see the connections. During those student years, Didion admits, she failed to forge for herself "a mind that could deal with the abstract." She was, she writes, "traveling on what I knew to be a very shaky passport, forged papers...no legitimate resident in any world of ideas" (2).

Many women, myself included, would admit to feeling the same sense of unease about the validity of our "passports" in an academic world which does not know how to hear alternative voices. Belenky and her co-authors report that the majority of the 135 women they interviewed said that while they "were drawn to the sort of knowledge that emerges from firsthand observation," they attended institutions which emphasized "abstract 'out of context' learning" (200). In The Reproduction of Mothering," Nancy Chodorow explains these differences in feminine and masculine personality as deriving from "different boundary experiences and differently constructed and experienced inner object-worlds" (169). "The basic feminine sense of self," she writes, "is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate" (169). The question is, How do we translate this information in our composition classrooms and in our own academic writing?

I remember my recently divorced friend telling me about a man she had begun dating. "Our conversations had to go back so far before they could begin," she said, "that for him it wasn't worth

the trouble." "'Why can't we just begin where we begin?'" he had asked her. "'What's the point of all the other stuff?'" I think about my father telling my mother and my husband telling me, "Can't you just get to the point." It seems like men are always asking women to get to the point. But perhaps the most important part of the point is the way in which one gets to it.

There is no place to acknowledge personal context in the modern academic essay (undergraduates especially must learn this lesson early on), which demands that one put aside feelings, intuitions, and experiences and instead somehow stand outside one's self and reason objectively and impersonally (is that a possibility?). One learns to open with an assertion of authority and to proceed in a logical linear fashion to show the truth of that assertion, (or so one is advised by one's instructor). One uses authorities as support for one's views or attacks their views to bolster one's own authority. Readers are not one's friends; they are one's opponents. The very form of the academic essay, it seems to me, excludes those who choose to speak in different voices.

And perhaps even more dangerous is the possibility, which Keith Fort suggests in "Form, Authority, and the Critical Essay," that the form itself, by limiting the attitudes that may be expressed, also controls the attitudes. "In general, we cannot have attitudes towards reality that cannot be expressed in available forms," Fort writes. If we are only allowed to express ourselves in the form of the standard critical essay, then "we can only have an attitude that would result in the

proper form" (174). The standard form of the critical essay "conditions students to think in terms of authority and hierarchy" (178) and to write in a spirit of competitiveness. If we privilege other forms, what new forms and ways of knowing will emerge?

In her CCCC's talk "Academic Conventions and Teacher Expectations: A Feminist Perspective" (March 1990), Pat Sullivan pointed out that to be successful in the academy, women have learned "to argue like men" and perhaps "more alarming" to read women's discourse with those same expectations. Sullivan gave the example of a graduate student whose thesis she was directing--a woman who was having a great deal of difficulty writing in a direct and logical fashion because she was letting her sources voice multiple views. The student was mediating among the voices without coming to any final conclusions. Sullivan admitted that she helped the student to revise the paper until she "got it right." Only now, Sullivan said, does she realize that she did not know how to "hear" the woman's discourse. We must learn, she said, to listen for the differences in women's and men's discourse in order to help women writers compose themselves as they write.

I wonder, when I think about Sullivan's assertion, how "we" (does she mean both men and women?) should "listen." Should we listen as "women" listening? (Can women listen as "other" than women?) If we listen as women, what will we hear that will help women to compose themselves? From what position might men "listen" to women's writing? If we as women (or we as men)

listen with the expectation of discovering differences, what differences will appear?

I worry about the label "woman's discourse" and its implication of "essential" difference, yet I also want to explore the possibilities for women writers in light of Chodorow's and Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberger, and Tarule's views. Rather than trying to discover what makes a written voice distinctly a "woman's" or a "man's," I think we might instead look at the personal essay as a composition--of self and literary form--which will allow multiple voices to be heard. By its very nature and genus, the personal essay is open to diverse (rather than simply linear) structures; it invites conversation, and allows the writer to think, observe, and reflect at leisure.

Last semester my student Alex told me that he really disliked Tillie Olsen's "Silences." "She's arguing for something, but she's just not coming across as very assertive," he said. "It bothers me that she uses all these quotes from other people to make her point, whatever her point is," Alex went on. "Why didn't she just use her own words?" When I went back to reread Olsen's essay in light of Alex's observations, I found myself distracted by her constant use of parenthetical explanations and asides. I too wanted Olsen to get to the point, or at least to stop interrupting herself. Until I read:

> How much it takes to become a writer...: how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for

> one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman (27).

I think about my own writing and the forms I choose to explore and comprehend my experiences, both personal and professional. It feels right to me to let these other voices into my work. I want my readers to hear what others have "said" to me and what they say to each other. I like to think about the possibilities--how an essay composes itself as it "listens" to the conversation. Yet I also want my voice to be heard. As I situate myself in the context of all of these voices--the voices of my family, my friends, my colleagues, along with the voices of "authority"--I also establish who I am and what I think.

Some of the flowers in my Virginia garden are over fifteen years old; I can trace their roots to the gardens of my past, to family and to friends. Others are not so old; hybrid specimens from nurseries and annuals from seed--I've tried planting nasturtiums for the first time this year. As each transplanted flower or seed takes root and grows in new soil, it changes the composition of the garden and seems itself to change as it finds its place among the others. Two years ago I dug the "Lambs Ears" from my brother's Illinois garden and carried them on the plane, wrapped in wet newspaper in a plastic bag. Now they have established themselves and wander gently around the yellow buttercups. The pink fringed poppies come from seeds my father sent me shortly before he died. "Beautiful and hardy," he had

jotted on the envelope. "Plant them before the first frost." This morning I separated the Montauk daisies, which originally came from the garden of my close friend in New York, and gave small clumps to two of my neighbors. In return they have given me wild lavendar phlox and scarlet "Bee Balm." I know these new ones will fit, but I need to make room. Next week, I promise myself, I will spend time weeding and redigging the borders. Though I like the flowers to grow at will, I also like the appearance of a neat deeply dug border.

Author's Note: I want to thank Laura Brady, a friend and colleague, whose voice, though not "heard" in the text, was central to the conversation. As she read and responded to seemingly endless drafts, we found that each revision became a new conversation as the essay recomposed itself.

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